

## That Second Chance

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Summary: It was to have been a simple reunion...but is anything in Sunnydale ever simple?

## That Second Chance

Disclaimer: I acknowledge the fact that I did not create most of the characters in this story. They were created by genius-man, Joss Whedon and belong to him as well as all the producers, network people, etc and so forth. I'm only borrowing them for a little while and I'll return them in brand-spanking new condition, cross my heart. However, I did create Paul and anyone else in here who you do not recognize.

Author's Notes: The story takes place ten years into the future. All the events up until and including Graduation Day have happened as Joss wanted them to. I'm just taking the story in a different direction from that point. I hope you enjoy it.

Dedication: This one goes out to Joseph B, for seeing me through the horrible bout of writer's block that hit me about halfway through writing this. I appreciate your insight, your humor and your friendship very much.....even if I was right about that whole Willow-and-Oz-in-bed-during-the-credits thing:)

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Buffy Summers-Garrison opened up her mailbox and peered inside. Catalogs and bills. She sighed and reluctantly pulled the few items out. Tucking them under her arm, she headed into her two-story colonial house. A loud, piercing cry of "mommy" reached her ears before she could even close the front door. Her five year-old daughter, Blakely, bolted down the stairs on her little feet and threw herself against Buffy's side.

"What's wrong, honey?", Buffy soothed, the mail and her briefcase forgotten as she bent down to her daughter's level.

"Jerwemy's chasing me!", the little girl cried, just as her older brother appeared at the top of the stairs, his wiry, six-and-a-half year-old body wrapped in a black cape. He growled at his sister as he bounded down the stairs, bearing plastic Halloween fangs.

"I'm gonna get you!", Jeremy shouted, lunging for Blakely. She let out another cry, burying her face in Buffy's shoulder. "I'm gonna suck your blood!"

"Okay, that's enough", Buffy announced, straightening back up and peeling Blakely from her body. "No one is going to get anyone. And there will be no, I repeat no, sucking of blood in this house. Do you understand me, young man?" Buffy put her hands on her slender hips and looked down at her son.

"But Mommy!! Daddy said I could be a vampire for Halloween", Jeremy protested. Seeing the look he got from his mother, he immediately stopped whining. Buffy held out her hand for the fake fangs. Dejectedly, he pulled them from his mouth and gave them to her.

"Now, I want you both to march upstairs and wash your hands for dinner. And Jeremy, if you want dessert, you will not splash Blakely with water like last night, all right?" The little boy nodded, solemnly. Buffy gave each child a warm smile before they scooted upstairs to do her bidding. Once they were out of sight, she sighed once more as she bent down to pick up the fallen mail and her briefcase. She loved her children more than life itself, but they were just like she was at their age, more than a handful.

"Buffy?", a muffled voice called her. Buffy walked across the living room and into the spacious kitchen. Her husband of almost eight years, Paul, was standing at the stove. "Hey you", he grinned, stirring a pot of what appeared to be spaghetti sauce. "Was our little vampire on the prowl again?"

Buffy nodded wearily as she rinsed Jeremy's fangs out in the sink. "I thought we agreed that it would be better for him to go as a ghost this year. I can't imagine where he gets this vampire inclination." She said the last part almost to herself as she tossed the mail onto the counter.

"Ah, give him a break, Buffy. Apparently the only cool thing to go as is a vampire. Ghosts were completely last year", Paul joked, giving her a kiss before handing her the ladle.

"Oh...I guess it's all right then. I don't want to be the evil mommy. I mean, I already make him brush his teeth every morning \*and\* night", she smiled. Even after the worst of days, Paul could always make her feel better.

Paul wiped his hands on a dish-towel and began sorting through the mail. "Sounds like you had a hard day. Wanna talk about it?"

Buffy gave the sauce a vigorous stir. "The same old same old. It's not like it's not hard enough being the newest lawyer in the firm. But to be the only woman, too? It's just a daily exercise in patience and self-control."

"Well, if I know you, and I think I do...." Paul winked at his wife. "...it won't be long before they're taking your orders." Buffy leaned over for another kiss.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. I needed it." She pointed to the mail with the ladle. "Anything interesting?"

"Bill...bill...catalog...sample of some perfume...bill...ah, Victoria's Secret..." Buffy shot her husband a teasingly stern look. "...another bill....and a letter for you."

"Who's the letter from?", Buffy asked, taste-testing the sauce.

Paul squinted his handsome face to better read the lettering without his reading glasses. "It doesn't say. The only return address is....La Boca del Infierno." He paused, puzzled. "I really should have paid more attention in Spanish class. What does that mean?"

Every muscle in Buffy's body became tense and her mouth went dry. "Let me see it", she whispered. Paul handed her the letter.

It was just a plain white envelope with her name and the Spanish phrase typed in small letters on the front. Her hands shaking, Buffy tore it open. Inside, was a small Polaroid picture. Her shock turned to horror as her green-blue eyes scanned the photo. Hurriedly, she flipped it over. On the other side, in black marker were the words "Come home".

"Buffy?", Paul asked, concerned. "What is it?"

"Um...it's nothing...nothing." She stuffed the picture back in its envelope.

"Are you sure? You're white as a sheet." Paul's strong arms enfolded his wife.

Buffy pulled away from his embrace. "I'm fine. I'm just going to run upstairs and change clothes. If the kids get down before I do, just go ahead and start dinner." Paul nodded and watched her walk out of the kitchen.

Once she was sure Paul couldn't see her, she broke into a run, taking the stairs two at a time. Even after all these years and two children, her Slayer agility and strength had not left her. She paused before entering the master bedroom she shared with her husband. Slayer. That was a word she hadn't allowed herself to think of in quite awhile. Memories, bittersweet and unwanted, crashed down upon her; her chest rose and fell with each breath. Forcing calm, she sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled her address book from the small end table. Buffy frantically flipped to the "R" section and scanned the list of names and numbers before finding the right one. Her fingers still shaking a little, she dialed the long-distance number.

"Please still be there", she muttered, biting her lip.

After several rings, a familiar voice answered. "Hello?"

"Willow?", Buffy asked, the name bringing tears to her eyes. Could it really have been ten years since she had heard this voice?

"Speaking. Who is this?"

"It's...it's Buffy."

There was a slight intake of breath on the other end, followed by a long pause. "Buffy. Is that really you?"

The former Slayer smiled through her tears. "It's me, Will."

"Buffy.....I....I can't believe it", her old friend whispered. Buffy could almost picture her putting her hand to her mouth. "How...how are you?"

"I'm doing really well. And you are...?" The conversation seemed so forced, Buffy noticed.

"The same." Another long pause. "So, what's up?" The slight quirkiness of her voice....Buffy had missed that and never realized it until now.

She looked down at the hateful letter. "I got something in the mail today. And I...well, I didn't know who else to call."

"What is it?", Willow asked, more politely than genuinely curious.

"It's Giles. Someone has him."

There was a strained silence. "Giles?"

"In the envelope was a picture of Giles and the back of the picture said 'come home'. Willow, someone who knows who I was must have taken him. They want me to go back to Sunnydale and...rescue him, I guess."

"Buffy....you don't know?" Willow's voice was small over the line.

"Don't know what?"

Her old friend took a deep breath. "Giles died a year ago."

Buffy went numb. "Giles.....he's?....oh my god."

"I thought you somehow knew. I'm sorry, Buffy", Willow apologized.

Tears threatened to stream down Buffy's face. "How?"

"Vamp attack. We told him he was getting too old to patrol. But you know Giles", Willow said in the matter-of-fact way of someone who had had time to deal with the horrible event.

"He's not.....", Buffy couldn't manage to express her thought.

Willow quickly replied, "No. We got to him before they could do that, thank goddess."

Buffy was relieved, but the news had yet to fully sink in. "I should have been there."

"Yeah. Yeah, maybe you should have been." A slight touch of bitterness colored Willow's words.

Another awkward pause fell upon them. "I don't know what to do, Will."

"Why don't you do what the picture says, Buffy? How long has it been anyways?"

"Ten years. Ever since...." She stopped.

Willow swallowed. "Cordelia's funeral."

"How is Xander doing?", Buffy wiped at her tears.

"Much better. It just took him awhile to...function again. Actually, he's been married for about four years now", Willow answered.

Buffy smiled at the news. "Oh really? To whom?"

"Me."

"Oh Will. That's wonderful", Buffy congratulated her, warmly.

She could feel Willow's happiness through the phone. "Yeah. So...come home, Buffy. We miss you."

"I...I miss you too." Buffy heard a noise at the door and turned slightly to see her husband standing in the doorway. "And I'll give that some thought."

Some of the happiness left Willow's tone. "You do that. It was good to..hear your voice again, Buffy", Willow said, quickly.

"You too Will. Take care." Buffy waited for Willow's returned farewell, before she replaced the reciever into its cradle. "Paul. How long have you been standing there?"

"Just a second. I was a little worried about you." He walked over and sat down next to her. "Did you take care of everything?"

Buffy chose her words carefully. "You know how you always say you'd like me to be more...open about my past?" Paul nodded. "How would you like for us to take the kids on a long weekend to California?"

He stared at his wife for a few seconds, before indicating his agreement. "I think they'd like that. But what brought this on, Buffy?"

The former Slayer stared out the window. "It's time for me to go home."

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"Are we there yet?", Jeremy asked from his place in the backseat of the rented Ford Taurus.

Buffy could see her husband's hands clench the wheel a little tighter as he headed down I-17. This was the twentieth time their son had asked that question since they had left the Los Angeles airport and the fortieth time since they had left North Carolina. To spare Paul a breakdown, she turned to see the children better.

"It's not much longer now, Jeremy. Why don't you finish coloring the picture you started on the plane?", she suggested. Jeremy sighed dramatically, but fished around in his backpack for the coloring book. Paul gave his wife a grateful look. She winked at him, as she turned the radio up a bit.

"Mommy?", Blakely caught her mother's attention and grinned widely. "Are we there yet?"

An hour and several "'are we there yet's" later, Buffy spotted the familiar sign that greeted travelers to Sunnydale, California.

"I'm home", she said to herself. Then, to her husband, "Turn right onto Main and follow it until you reach Revello Drive. It'll be on your left."

The town hadn't changed much since Buffy had left in almost a decade earlier. It was still, and probably always would be, a "one-Starbuck's" kind of town. The memory of Xander's description of Sunnydale brought Buffy both a faint smile and a wave of sorrow. She was beginning to remember why she had felt the need to leave town. Main Street took them right past the new high school. Well, not exactly new anymore, Buffy corrected herself. To her amusement, the school looked almost identical to the one she had attended for three years and ultimately blown up.

"Revello, you said?", Paul interrupted her thoughts. She nodded. "Here it is." As the car pulled down the familiar street, Buffy's throat closed up. So many memories. The day she and her mom had moved to Sunnydale. Hot tears sprung up at the mention of her mother, who had died three years earlier from cancer. The night Angel had spent at the house after they were chased by the Three. "Angel", she whispered, closing her eyes. It had been so long; the picture she had in her mind of him had faded considerably. She wasn't sure she would even recognize him if she saw him. That is, if he was even here. She honestly didn't know if he was.

"Honey? Are you okay?", Paul took his eyes off the road for a second to see his wife.

Buffy wiped at her eyes. "Yeah, I'm fine. Oh, stop!" Paul slammed on the brakes. "This was my house."

"Did you hear that kids? Your mommy used to live at that house", Paul pointed. The children did not seem overly impressed.

The house hadn't changed much either, Buffy found herself glad to note. A new coat of paint and some elaborate landscaping was about the extent of differences from the last time she had seen it on that

morning, so long ago.

"I wish I could go in", Buffy confessed. "But I'm sure there are new owners. It'd...well, it'd be awkward."

"Are you sure?", Paul asked, doubtfully. His wife nodded, emphatically. "Should I just keep going down Revello."

"Um...just for a little while. You'll see a street to your right in a minute, Westminster Place. Turn onto it", Buffy instructed, crossing her fingers that they would be home.

Jeremy had begun to take an interest in his new surroundings. "Where are we going, mommy?"

"We're going to see some of mommy's friends, baby." Buffy smiled at her son. This appeared to satisfy his curiosity. He returned to his coloring book.

Buffy exhaled slowly. In her youth, she had faced countless vampires, demons and other creatures that go bump in the night, with little to no fear. And now, the prospect of seeing the only people in the world who knew how many times she had saved it, scared her half to death. Her departure from Sunnydale ten years earlier had been less than ideal. Would her return be any better?

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Buffy drew a shaky breath and knocked on the familiar door of Willow Rosenberg's childhood home. After her parents had moved to Florida shortly after graduation, Willow had continued to live in the only house she ever had lived in, much to Buffy's relief. At least some things hadn't changed. The former Slayer squeezed her husband's hand tightly in anticipation. What was taking them so long to answer the door? She knocked again.

"Who is it?", a feminine voice that Buffy didn't recognize asked through the door.

"My name is Buffy. I'm here to see Willow. And Xander", she added, remembering that they were married now.

A few seconds later, the door opened to reveal a teenage girl, holding a toddler with a mop of red curls. "They're not home right now. I can tell them you stopped by, though", the girl offered.

Buffy's anticipation slid a notch. "Oh. Well, can you tell me where they are?"

The girl hesitated, as if she wasn't sure she wanted to give out this information to a stranger. "They just went out....Buffy. Oh!! Wait a minute!! Are you Buffy Summers?"

"Um....yes...yes I am", Buffy replied, nervously. What did this girl know about her?

"I've heard about you from the Harrises. Man, they're gonna be sorry they missed you." The girl shifted the child to her other hip.

"I didn't think they'd...talk about me much." Buffy found herself both pleased and worried. "They wouldn't happen to be at the library, would they?"

The girl nodded. "They're always at the library. I babysit Anne for them." The toddler grinned at her name. Buffy really looked at the child for the first time. Xander and Willow's daughter...and they had given her Buffy's middle name.

"She looks like Willow", Buffy noted, her voice threatening to give out. It was all so much to take in.

"Yeah", the girl agreed, looking at Anne with affection. "But she's a complete goof. Just like Mr. Harris. Look, I can give you directions to the school if you want to go see them."

The former Slayer smiled appreciatively. "That's okay. I know how to get there....." She trailed off, realizing that she didn't know the girl's name.

"Helen. I'm Kendall's sister", the girl introduced herself. When Buffy failed to recognize her sister's name, she continued. "Kendall....she's the Sl...." Buffy's eyes widened and she interrupted the girl before she could finish her thought.

"Well, Helen, thank you very much, but we had better get to the library before it gets too late." Buffy took Paul's hand once again, in preparation to leave.

Helen looked confused. "Um...okay. It was cool to finally meet you. I mean, it's not every day you get to meet one of the greatest Sl...."

"It was nice to meet you too", Buffy once again stopped Helen before she could say the "S" word. "Goodbye." She practically dragged Paul back to the car.

"That was a little rude, Buffy", her husband said lightly, not wishing to start a fight. "What are you one of the greatest of, anyways?"

Buffy checked to make sure both children were all right in the backseat, before she started the car. "Oh...I...well, I used to be known as one of the best...um...sledders around. Sunnydale actually gets snow...every now and then."

Paul seemed unconvinced, but decided not to press the issue any further. "So, should we go check into the hotel?"

Buffy shook her head as she drove back towards Main Street. "I'd like to go the library first. I can drop you and the kids off, if you'd like."

"No, that's all right. I do want to meet your friends." He reached over and traced her jawline, lovingly.

She forced a smile. "Yeah. It should be...interesting."



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Buffy pulled the Taurus into the practically empty high school parking lot. Turning off the engine, she looked at the two other cars in the lot. An extremely familiar, very beat up black van and a rather new looking Chevy Cavalier. As her family climbed out of the car, Buffy closed her eyes and took a moment to try to assimilate all that had happened in the past half hour. How could things be so different, and yet, so familiar at the same time? \*You can never go home.\* Not entirely true, Buffy thought. You could go home, but would you be wanted, or more importantly, needed anymore? She pushed this from her mind, determinedly. The real question now was, how long could she keep the secret of her past from her husband? I should have told him a long time ago, Buffy berated herself. But how does one explain a past as complicated as hers?

"Honey?", Paul knocked on the car's window, bringing her back to reality. "Are you coming?"

Buffy quickly unbuckled her seat belt and got out of the car. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

Jeremy looked up at his mother. "Mommy, does this place make you sad?"

She knelt down to her son's level and took his hand in hers. "Yes, sweetie. It does a little."

"Why, mommy?" Blakely pulled at the cross that hung at Buffy's throat.

Paul watched with quiet detachment. He wanted to know her answer just as much as the children.

"Well, it's a little hard to explain. Some very sad things happened here. But, some very good things happened here too. So, it's not a bad place. Okay?" Both children nodded. Buffy gave them both a hug before straightening. Taking hold of their little hands, she began to walk towards the school's entrance. Paul followed suit. Her answer had been vague, as it always was when she was asked about her past. He had not truly expected it to be otherwise.

Buffy choked back a laugh when they finally entered Sunnydale High School. Apparently, the architect who had been given the job of building a new high school after the 1999 graduation ceremony had either been very lazy or very unoriginal. With only a few minor alterations, the building was exactly the same as Buffy remembered the old school being, inside and out. If she weren't holding her children's hands, she could have been convinced that she was still a senior in high school. The Slayer. In love with Angel. Close friends with Willow and Xander. And above all, happy.

Before another batch of tears could start up, Buffy readjusted her hold on Jeremy and Blakely's hands, clenched her teeth and set off down the nostalgic hall that she knew would ultimately lead to the library. In a few seconds, they were there. Buffy looked up over the double doors. Gone were the large letters spelling out "library". A plaque off to the side read, "The Rupert Giles Memorial Library". It's fitting, Buffy thought, blinking her eyes rapidly. Most people would like a national holiday or holy day of obligation to be

remembered. Giles would want a library.

"Are you sure you're up to this?", Paul placed a hand on his wife's arm. "We're going to be here for a few days; we don't have to do everything today."

Buffy smiled, nervously. "I've waited long enough, Paul." Holding her breath, she pushed the library doors open. Five heads swung over to see who was intruding.

"Oh my goddess!! Buffy?!" Willow put both hands to her mouth in shock. She had changed, that was obvious. Marriage, motherhood, and a lifetime on the Hellmouth still hadn't taken away Willow's quiet beauty, though. "Xander....it's Buffy!", she continued, unnecessarily.

Buffy's eyes swung over to see the man standing next to Willow. Her dear friend, the boy who had made her laugh, made her pull her hair out and saved her life once or twice, was most assuredly not a boy anymore. Still handsome, in an annoying-boy-next-door way. But Buffy could tell, immediately, that Xander had grown up. And it wrenched her heart to sense that he was not overly happy to see her.

"Buffy", he said, rather flatly. "Duchess of Buffonia."

"Hello Xander", Buffy could feel the tears she had been fighting begin to fall. "I...I can't believe that I'm actually here." Her eyes moved from Xander, to the man next to him. "Oz!"

The first warm smile of the day that wasn't from her family came from Oz. "Buffy." He walked over to her and gave her a long hug. "It's about time you came to see us." A slight wink gave away his nonchalant teasing.

Buffy returned the hug, gratefully. "What can I say? I like to make an entrance." There was a slight tug at her skirt.

"Mommy?", Jeremy asked. "Who is this?"

She brushed the tears away. "Jeremy....Blakely...this is Oz."

Oz bent down and shook Jeremy's hand. "It's very nice to meet both of you." Jeremy stared warily at this man who had won his mother's affection so easily.

"Oz?", Blakely repeated. He nodded. "Are you the Wizard?" Her eyes were full of wonder. This appeared to be the desperately-needed ice breaker. The former Slayer and Slayerettes began to laugh.

"Definitely too much TV", Buffy joked. Oz shook his head, understandingly. "Oz, Willow....Xander. This is my husband, Paul."

Her husband stepped forward slightly. "Hey", he greeted the strangers, awkwardly.

Willow moved over to them. "Paul...I'm very happy to meet you." She shook his hand. Then, turning to her old friend, "Buffy!" The women

hugged, tearfully. After a long moment, they pulled apart. "How did you know where to find us?"

"Lucky guess with a little help from your babysitter." She and Willow exchanged a meaningful look, before hugging once more.

Throughout all of this, Xander and Paul had been sizing each other up. Daring to make the first move, Paul crossed over to the strange man and put his hand out. "Paul Garrison", he introduced himself.

Xander hesitated for a second before shaking Paul's hand. "Alexander Harris. Xander."

Willow suddenly realized that there were still two people in the room who hadn't been introduced. "Oh, gods. Where are my manners?" She led Buffy over to the other two. "Buffy, I'd like you to meet William Hawkins and Kendall Scott."

Recognizing the name, Buffy froze. She grasped her friend's hand tighter, but William and Kendall didn't say anything; they just gave a slight wave of greeting. Thankfully, Willow could still read Buffy's mind. She didn't make any further introductions.

Buffy turned back to her family. "Paul, the kids have had a really long day. Do you want to take them on to the hotel. It's not very hard to get there." She could see the confusion and, even worse, hurt in his eyes, but she didn't know what else to do. There were just things about her past that needed to remain a secret.

"Sure, we'll go get settled in. Will you be back for dinner?", Paul asked, taking the children's hands.

"I should be", Buffy gave him a kiss on his cheek and ruffled each child's hair. "Just stay on Main until it curves to the right. You'll see the hotel on your left after you pass the mall." Paul nodded. He and the children left the library. Some of the tension left the room. But not all of it.

"He doesn't know about you, does he?" Xander folded his arms over his chest, disapprovingly.

Buffy shook her head. "I never found a way to tell him. It's not like it's an easy thing to tell someone, Xander." She found herself growing slightly defensive.

"Oh, I know", the before-silent Kendall spoke up. "It took me awhile to tell my sister. I just didn't know how she'd react." Buffy smiled at the girl. "It's really great to meet you. I've heard a lot about you", she continued.

"Yes, your name is not unfamiliar on the Hellmouth", William added, his British accent immediately giving away his position in this new band of Slayerettes. "I am sorry about your former Watcher, Mrs. Summers....Garrison, excuse me. He was very respected by the younger members of the Council."

Buffy lowered her head in acknowledgement. "It's so odd. I hadn't talked to Giles in....years. But now, I feel like a part of me has been ripped away."

"The Slayer-Watcher bond", Kendall said, knowingly. Buffy nodded in agreement.

There was a slight pause. "What made you decide to come home?", Oz asked the question that everyone was thinking.

"Well...I wanted my family to see a little part of my life. And I...I missed you all." Buffy cleared her throat. "And then there's this." She pulled the photo of Giles from her purse. The Slayerettes gathered around to see it better.

"Where did you get this?" Xander flipped the picture over to see the words on the back. "It looks like it was just taken a year or two ago."

"It came in the mail last week. No return address except 'La Boca del Infierno'. I thought someone had kidnapped Giles." Buffy sat down at the closest table. The greatest change she had seen since returning happened to be the saddest. The library was completely modern. Gone was the homey, old-fashioned wood decor. This was a library of modern convenience. Computers, linoleum, and harsh over-head lighting. Somehow, it didn't seem right. "And that's when I called Willow", she finished.

Oz raised an eyebrow at Willow. "You didn't tell us, Will?"

"I didn't think she'd actually come", Willow replied, a little too evenly. There was some definite tension between the former couple. It made Buffy wonder exactly what had happened after she had left that morning ten years earlier.

"Well, whoever sent you this has gotten their way", Kendall reasoned. "It brought you here. The question is, who sent it to you?"

Buffy replaced the picture in her purse. "Someone who, obviously, knows who I was." She paused, as a terrible thought came to her head. "Um...can I ask a question?"

"Shoot", Xander replied.

The former Slayer took a deep breath. "Is Angel still....." She was unable to finish.

"Still what? Alive? That's not exactly the right word, is it? Still good? Hmm...not the best phrase either, eh?", Xander spat out, bitterly.

Willow put a hand on her husband's shoulder. "She just asked a simple question, Xander", she said in his ear. Then, she looked Buffy straight in the eye. "Angel didn't do this, Buffy. He's still...alive and still cursed."

"He is", Kendall assured them. "He helped me slay three vamps last week."

"You didn't say anything about that before. How am I supposed to keep an accurate Watcher's diary if I don't know all the details of your slayings?", William admonished his Slayer.

Kendall shrugged her well-toned shoulders. "Make use of that creative writing class you had to take at Oxford?" William rolled his eyes and shook his head, good-naturedly. Their exchange made Buffy ache to see Giles again. She looked out the window to hide her sudden swell of emotion. To her horror, the first signs of the day's sunset were beginning to show.

"It's going to be dark soon. God, I hope they make it to the hotel before the sun goes down." Buffy wrung her hands.

Oz sat down next to her. "I'm sure they'll be fine. The vampire population has actually decreased a lot in the past decade." Buffy smiled, appreciatively.

"Still, I want to get back and be with them." She rose to go.

"Wait! I'll go with you, Buffy", Willow offered. Buffy noticed Xander open his mouth to protest, but apparently, thought better of it and stopped.

The former Slayer's smile turned to a girlish grin. "I'd like that."

Willow crossed over to the check-in desk, leaned over the counter and retrieved a couple of stakes. She handed one to Buffy. "Just in case." Willow kissed her husband goodbye before she joined Buffy in walking out of the library.

The pointed, wooden weapon felt so strange in her hand. If faced with a vampire, would her twenty-nine year old self even remember how to fight properly?

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Buffy and Willow walked in silence for a couple of blocks. Buffy desperately wanted to ask a myriad of questions, but she wasn't sure that her old friend would want to share a lot of information with her. Willow, however, solved the problem on her own.

"So, how did you and Paul meet?", she asked, as they passed the former site of Sunnydale High. A lovely memorial park had been created to commemorate the students who had died at the 1999 graduation ceremony.

"We met our sophomore year at Yale. We had the same humanities class." Buffy blushed at the memory. "And we've been together ever since."

They lapsed into silence again. Finally, it was too much for Buffy. "God, Will, there's so much I don't know!", she blurted out. "I don't know what you do for a living, what Xander does or...." She hesitated. "Why you're with him and not with Oz." Willow stopped suddenly. Buffy immediately regretted asking. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"No, it's all right. I can talk about it", Willow assured her friend. She took a deep breath. "To make a long story short, three years after you left, Oz asked me to marry him and I accepted. Then he got

a bad cold and went to the doctor for some tests. The doctors...well, they found out that Oz is...sterile. Residual effect of lycanthropy, perhaps; we don't really know why. But he can't have children."

"Oh Will..."

"I told him it didn't matter", Willow continued. "There are so many children in the world who need good homes. We could adopt them all. But he thought that wasn't good enough for me, that I needed more. So, he called off the engagement."

"I'm so sorry", Buffy grasped her friend's hand.

Willow lifted her head in forced cheerfulness. "Don't be. There was a silver lining. Xander and I found each other...again. I mean...it was a little weird being around Oz at first. And then when Anne was born...." She didn't need to elaborate. "But it's gotten better."

Buffy was quiet for a second. "I don't think Xander wants me to be here."

"No, Buffy. He does, I promise. It's just...there are so many memories that he'd rather forget. Some that he even needs to forget."

"Does he still blame me for Cordelia's death?"

Willow hesitated, then shook her red head. "He's made his peace with what happened. It wasn't your fault, Buffy. Cordy knew the risk involved with slaying. And no one expected that vamp to have a gun." The old friends walked on for a couple of paces.

"I wish I could have known that ten years ago", Buffy confessed. "I thought everyone hated me."

"Would you have stayed even if you had known we didn't blame you?"

The former Slayer thought for a minute. "I don't think so, Will. I just...needed to get out. I know, it was horrible and selfish of me, but...I didn't want to have that responsibility anymore. I watched a good friend die in another friend's arms and all I could think was, why didn't I stop that? I had quit the Council anyways. I knew that a new Slayer would be called and life would go on without me. And I was right. It has."

Willow listened to her friend and tried to be sympathetic. She realized it had been hard for Buffy, but it had also been hard for those she had left behind. Suddenly, something Buffy had said struck her. "Kendall didn't replace you", she said. Buffy looked at her, strangely. "She replaced the girl who replaced Faith."

Buffy was confused. "I thought the doctors said unless her guardian signed off her lifesupport, Faith would stay alive indefinitely. And the Mayor was her official guardian. The guardian from \*hell\*, but a guardian nonetheless."

"The Council stepped in about two years after you left. By then, Faith had been moved to a long term care facility. They pulled some

strings and got permission have the plug pulled. We asked for her to be cremated." Willow's voice held no sadness for the fate of the rogue Slayer. "Then Katherine was called, but she lived in Chicago and died four years ago. Kendall was called here in Sunnydale. Of course, the Council tried to keep us away from her, but we're Slayerettes. We always will be." Willow squeezed Buffy's hand.

Buffy returned the sign of affection distractedly. She was still trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. "So, if Kendall replaced Katherine and Katherine replaced Faith.....who replaced me?"

"No one", Willow said, after a slight pause. "You're still a Slayer."

Buffy stopped in her tracks. "What?"

"You can't just quit, Buffy. You should know it doesn't work that way. Once you've been called, you're a Slayer until you die. And unless I'm very mistaken, you're still pretty alive." Willow watched her sink down onto a nearby bench, a blank look of shock in her eyes.

"Why are you telling me this, Will?"

Her Wiccan friend sat down next to her. "Buffy, nothing happens by chance. You came back to Sunnydale for a reason. That picture just provided you with an excuse. It's time for you to take back your responsibilities."

"I have responsibilities, they've just changed. Don't you see? This part of my life is over! I have a family now, I work in a big law firm, I have...mortgage payments!! Slaying doesn't fit into that picture."

"It's your destiny", Willow said, simply.

Buffy shut her eyes, tightly. "You sound like Giles." Suddenly, she realized where they were. Her eyes popped open. "We're in the cemetery." Willow nodded. "Where is he buried?"

Willow pointed to a couple of headstones a few feet away. "Right next to Cordelia." The Slayer slowly stood up and crossed over to the graves.

Rupert Giles 1957 - 2008 "And when the sky is cloudy, there is still a light that shines on me, Shine on 'til tomorrow - let it be"

"Did we do all right with the headstone?" Willow approached Buffy.

Buffy pressed a hand to her mouth and nodded. "He liked the Beatles."

"And the Bay City Rollers, but there's no accounting for taste." Willow rested her head on Buffy's shoulder.

They remained there for a few minutes, silently remembering the man who had influenced their lives so much. Finally, Buffy broke out of

her semi-trance and looked over to the other grave. This, she had been to already. The day before she packed her bags and left Sunnydale, she had watched a coffin being lowered into this patch of ground.

Cordelia Chase 1981 - 1999 Beloved daughter and friend

Buffy slipped to her knees in front of the headstone. "I'm so sorry, Cordelia. Please forgive me."

"She'd tell you to forgive yourself, Buffy." Willow thought about what she had just said. "Well, maybe she wouldn't have said that exactly; we are talking about Cordelia here. But that's what she would have meant, deep down."

Buffy laughed despite her tears at the truth in that statement. Cordelia had never been one for sentimentalities. She stood back up. "I think I'd like to be alone for awhile."

Willow took no offense at this. "Of course. Are you sure you'll be okay here?"

"Well, I'm still a Slayer, aren't I?" Buffy stabbed her stake into the air. Willow smiled, hugged her once more and turned to leave the cemetery.

As soon as she couldn't hear her friend's footsteps, Buffy let out a pent up breath. She needed a moment to assimilate herself to all this new information. Forget a moment; she needed several hours, at least. But fate did not have that in store for her. A loud snap echoed through the now dark cemetery. Her stomach dropped. Was she really ready to face a vampire?

"Hello", she called out, clutching her stake tightly.

"Hello Buffy", came a deep reply from a nearby wooded area. The voice was like a memory from a dream.

She peered into the darkness. "Who's there?" In answer, a shadowy figure stepped from the brush.

"It's been a long time."

Buffy's hand automatically went to her cross. The cross he had given her so many years ago. "Angel."

His handsome face came into the moon's light. "Welcome home."

He looked exactly the same. Of course, she had known he would; he was now a 260 year old vampire. But while all her friends had visibly aged, Angel was the picture of the man he had been ten years earlier. Buffy suddenly became very aware of the tiny lines around her eyes, the little imprints that law school and two children had left on her.

"I...I don't know what to say", she said, truthfully. "What are you doing here?"

"In the cemetery? Patrolling. Here in Sunnydale?" Buffy nodded. "Well, it's very easy to avoid someone who doesn't live in town. There was



no need to move." Angel took a step forward.

Buffy instinctively stepped back. "This is all...very sudden." She put a hand to her forehead. Too late, she realized which one.

"Beautiful ring", Angel coolly commented. "How long have you been married?"

The Slayer wet her dry lips. "Eight years. His name is Paul."

Angel nodded, slowly. "Children?"

"Two. A boy and a girl." Buffy shoved her left hand into her coat pocket.

"Congratulations."

She couldn't tell if he was sincere or not. "Thank you", she replied anyways. The pause that followed was understandably uncomfortable.

"Where have you been for the past ten years?" Angel's eyes bored into her.

Buffy shrugged, slightly. "I went to Yale. Law school. Passed the bar. And now I work as a defense attorney."

"And somewhere in there you managed to get married and have two kids. Quite impressive", Angel's voice was decidedly sarcastic.

"Don't do this", Buffy said, warningly. "The last time we really talked, we fought. I thought maybe an entire decade would wipe the slate clean."

Angel looked down at the ground. "I suppose you're right. I am happy for you, Buffy. A normal life seems to suit you. I knew it would." He looked up suddenly and their eyes met. All of the unresolved feelings between them seemed to peak in that brief second. Before she knew what had happened, his arms had wrapped around her.

"I've dreamed about this", Angel whispered, kissing the top of her head. "For ten long years, I've thought about holding you again."

The pressure of his body against hers was so familiar. For the first years of her marriage, she had dreamed about this, too. She had lain awake at night wondering if she could ever truly be happy with Paul, ever love him like she had loved Angel. But day by day, she had come to realize that her relationship with Angel would never have been enough. Paul was the man she was meant to be with, not Angel. She finally understood this now, when she was so close to Angel and yet, felt nothing more than nostalgia. Gently, she pulled away from the embrace.

"Angel...I can't do this. I love Paul....our children...our life together. You and I....we're part of the past." She touched the cross at her throat.

The rejection hit Angel like a ton of bricks. But he was stoic.

Catching her chin in his strong hand, he forced her eyes to meet his once again. "You once asked me to tell you that I didn't love you. Now, I ask the same of you. Tell me you don't love me, even after all of these years."

Buffy stared into his bottomless eyes. "I don't love you, Angel. Not in the way you want."

He let go of her chin and took a step back. "I think I knew that. I just had to hear it", he finally said.

What had almost happened suddenly hit Buffy. "I have to go." She had the intense desire to see Paul.

Angel indicated his agreement. "Maybe I'll see you before you leave."

"Maybe." With that, Buffy left him, a lone creature of the night in the middle of the cemetery, thinking about what could have been.

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Buffy covered the few blocks to the hotel in which she and her family had reserved a suite. Her encounter with Angel had been unsettling to say the least. All she wanted to do was kiss her children goodnight and curl up in bed with her husband. Once she reached the hotel, she went to the front desk and got the extra key. She took the stairs up to the second floor and proceeded down to room 232. Quietly, as not to wake the children, Buffy let herself inside. The suite was completely dark; Paul must have fallen asleep along with Jeremy and Blakely. She ran her hand along the edge of the closest bed until she felt her husband's foot. Grasping his ankle, she gently shook him awake.

"Buffy?", he asked, his voice sleep-heavy.

"It's me", she whispered. "I'm sorry. Getting back here took longer than I expected."

Through the dark, she could sense Paul sitting up. "It's okay." He sounded a little more awake. "I just put the kids down a little while ago."

Buffy stretched her arms over her head. "That trip was so tiring. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll sleep in tomorrow morning." She shuffled over to where the bed-side lamps generally were in hotels. "I'll try not to wake them up." Fumbling, she flipped the light on and looked down at the other bed.

It was empty.

"Paul!!", Buffy screamed. "They're gone!!"

Her husband scrambled to his feet. "What do you mean?!"

Buffy fell to her knees in utter shock. "Jeremy...Blakely.....they're gone."

"Now, let's calm down. Maybe they're just hiding in the closet." He ran over and threw open the closet door. "Well... maybe they're in the bathroom." He leaned into the small bathroom and turned the light on. The children were nowhere in sight. "Oh my god. They are gone" Paul ran over to the window. It was slightly open. "I don't know how; I was only asleep for a few minutes. But someone took them, Buffy."

Buffy let out another cry. Her shoulders hunched over under the weight of her sobs. Paul rushed back to his wife and gathered her up in his arms. "It's going to be okay.....we'll get them back....I promise." But his soothing voice didn't fool Buffy. She could feel his chest rising and falling, his heart rapidly beating, and his tears wetting her hair.

"It's all my fault", Buffy cried, breaking away from Paul. "They killed Cordelia, they killed Giles and now....they've taken my babies..."

"What are you talking about, Buffy?" Paul reached for her, but she wrestled out of his grip. "Buffy....calm down....we have to call the police and..." She cut him off.

"The police can't do anything about this, Paul. They never can. I'm the only one who can find our children." She felt for the stake in her jacket pocket.

Paul ran a hand through his hair. "Buffy, you're upset. You're not making any sense. I'll call the police and they can begin a search." He reached for the phone, but before he could grab the receiver, Buffy pulled the jack out of the wall. "What the hell?"

His wife's voice was deadly calm, an enormous change from a few seconds earlier. "This is not a police matter. You have to trust me on this, Paul. There is so much you don't know, so much I should have told you years ago."

"I don't understand." Buffy saw the look in his eyes; he was thinking she had gone crazy.

"Please trust me, that's all I ask. We have to go." She headed for the door.

Paul rose to go after her. "Where are we going?"

"To get our children back."

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"They just left the window open a little?" Willow held Buffy's hand tightly, as she had for the past twenty minutes, all during her friend's account of the evening's horrible events.

Buffy nodded. Instead of shutting down, she found that the kidnapping had given her a renewed energy. She could feel the blood rushing through her veins. And she badly wanted to hit something.

Xander paced behind the couch. "Vamps?"

"Who else?" Buffy suddenly remembered that Paul was in the room. She braced herself for his questions. "But I don't see how they got in. Maybe they'd been invited in before."

"Excuse me?" Paul held up one hand. "What are we talking about? Why aren't we out there finding our children?"

With a little inward sigh, Buffy turned to face her husband. "There's something you don't know about me, Paul. I haven't been able to tell you before, but I can't keep it a secret any longer." Behind her, she could hear Xander snort. Ignoring him, she went on. "Paul....I'm a vampire Slayer."

The blank look her husband gave her would have been comical if not for the circumstances. "A what?"

Buffy exchanged a look with Willow. "God...where do I begin?" Willow shrugged, helplessly. "Okay, let me just start from the beginning. When I was sixteen years old, I was informed that I was the Chosen One. The one girl in every generation who has the power and skills to fight vampires and demons, who, by the way, actually exist."

"Buffy, if this is a joke, it's a really bad time."

Buffy grabbed her husband's hands. "Listen to me, Paul. This is all true. I know how crazy it sounds, believe me. I've spent the past decade denying that four years of my life actually happened. But they did, and I have to accept that."

Paul looked at Willow and Xander. "What is she talking about?"

Xander sat on the arm of the couch. "We met Buffy when she moved to Sunnydale. We found out about her when she saved us from vampiric death. And from that day on, we helped her with all of her Slaying...stuff."

"We saved the world a couple of times", Willow tossed in, brightly. "The Master, Acathla...."

"Mayor Wilkins", Buffy added. Seeing her husband's painfully confused face, she stopped. "But we stray. The point is, I left Sunnydale to get away from all of this. And until last week, I thought I had succeeded."

"What happened last week?", Paul asked. Then, he remembered. "That letter you got....La Boca del Infierno.....the mouth of hell...." His voice fell off.

Buffy pulled the picture out of her jacket pocket. "This man was my Watcher, assigned by a Council to take care of me after I was called. Whoever sent me this, took our children."

"So...they have Jeremy and Blakley and your...Watcher?" Paul took the picture from his wife.

"Not exactly. Giles...died..was killed last year", Xander told Paul.

Buffy's husband closed his eyes. "This is a little too much for one night." He opened them again and looked at Buffy's friends. "Let me get this straight. You two aren't...Slayers...but you slay?"

Xander nodded. "We like to think of ourselves as Slayerettes."

"Are Blakely and Jermei Slayers? I mean, you're their mother." Paul handed her the picture.

Buffy shook her head. "It's not genetic. The Slayer is always a girl, called by some pre-determined force after the previous Slayer dies."

Paul nodded, slowly. "You understand, I'm taking a lot on faith here."

The Slayer looked at Xander. "We have to call the others. It's going to take everyone to get the kids back." Her old friend nodded and headed off to make the calls.

"The others?", Paul asked.

"Oz, Kendall, and William", Willow clarified.

Paul rubbed his eyes, wearily. "What are they going to do?"

"Well, Kendall is sort of a Slayer too", Buffy sighed. Just when her husband had started to understand, she was throwing him the loophole. "To make a very long story very short, I kind of died for a little while one night and another Slayer was called. But Xander brought me back and ever since then, there has been two Slayers in this world."

"Let me guess. Oz is Kendall's...Watcher, is it? And William is another...Slayerette?" Paul rested his elbows on his knees and ran his fingers through his hair.

Buffy smiled. "It's the other way around, actually. But, I think you're getting it."

"Believe me, I'm not." Paul stood up. "This is \*so\* far from my grasp of understanding. Let me ask a few more questions."

"Go ahead", Buffy encouraged her husband.

Paul thought for a second. "How do you kill a vampire?"

"Stake through the heart, beheading, fire, direct sunlight, and a rare poison. Oh, and holy water and crosses can hurt them like hell." She folded her hands in her lap. "Go on."

He was thrown by her calmness. "You act as if this is nothing at all!! We are talking about vampires here, Buffy!!"

"Welcome to my past, Paul." She jumped to her feet. "I lived this for three years; vampires and demons, witches and werewolves. The reason I am so blasé about it, is because there's not a damn thing I can do to change it. I am the Chosen One and saving the world from these things is my responsibility. Do you think that's easy? Try having the fate of the entire planet resting on your shoulders. And imagine

knowing that the only reason the earth is still spinning is because you and your friends managed to save it. Now can you see why I can't let it get to me?"

Paul looked at his wife. "But you did let it get to you. Why else would you have stayed away for ten years?"

Buffy's temporary anger died away. "I made a mistake. I ran. But fate, in its twisted way, has given me a second chance. So, I'm going to do what I should have done back then. I'm going to stay and I'm going to fight and I won't give up until our children are back with us again." A tear slid down her cheek. "That I promise you."

Xander chose that moment to rejoin them in the living room. "They're on their way. Kendall wants to call Angel, but I told her that was probably not a good idea." His tight features betrayed the fact that he was quite certain it wasn't a good idea.

"Angel might know more about what's going on underground than we do, Xander. Besides..." Buffy lowered her eyes. "I already saw him."

Willow bit her lip. "How'd it go?"

"Not too bad, actually", Buffy lied. "Time heals a lot of wounds."

Paul gave them all a suspicious look. "Who's Angel?"

"Buffy's ex from hell. Literally." Xander folded his arms across his broad chest.

"Xander!", Willow admonished her husband.

"Hey, we may be forced to work with him sometimes, but I reserve the right to not like Dead-Boy, now and forever", Xander defended himself, adamantly.

Buffy's husband was developing a serious headache. "Honey, your ex-boyfriend is...dead? Or is that just a clever nickname?"

Buffy glared at Xander. "Thank you ever so much." She turned to Paul. "Since this is apparently the night of revelations, I might as well tell everything. Angel was my first...steady boyfriend. He was..is a little bit older...."

"How old was he?" Paul looked up at his wife.

"260", Buffy mumbled, barely audible. "He's sort of vampire."

Paul buried his face in his hands. "Sort of a vampire? You're telling me that you kill vampires; it's your...job. But you...dated one? Is it just me, or does that not make sense?"

"It's not just you, buddy", Xander muttered, earning him another look from his wife.

The Slayer sat back down next to Paul. "There were some unique circumstances regarding Angel. As a rule though, vampires are always evil."

"Well this would explain why you haven't let our son dress like one for the past three Halloweens. Look, this is all very...strange to say the very least. And later, when I have more time, I'll process it all, but for right now, I just want to get our children back." His eyes were so painfilled and confused; it wrenched Buffy's heart in two.

She threw her arms around him. "We will. I promise. But I had to tell you this first. We're going to have to go up against these creatures and you're going to have to know how to protect yourself against them. Because if anything happened to you or the kids....I don't know what I'd do."

Paul's arms enfolded Buffy as he gently kissed her. "I know, sweetie. I just wish you had told me a little bit earlier....like eight years ago." His light tone told her he wasn't extremely angry with her for withholding the details of her past. "I think I know why you felt you couldn't though."

Willow cleared her throat loudly. "So, do we call Angel?" Buffy nodded in reply, her eyes never leaving Paul's. "I guess I'll do that." Willow made her way to her kitchen.

"I have one more question", Paul said, pulling away from his wife. "These vampires you think took the kids.....they won't....I mean, will they.....suck their blood?"

Buffy had no definite answer. "I don't think so. The kids are just bait, to get me to come and fight. But, vampires are not extremely patient creatures, which is why we need to get out there and find them as soon as we can." Paul nodded his understanding.

There was a sudden knock on the front door. Xander stood up and went to answer it. A few seconds later, Kendall and William emerged from the foyer into the living room.

"We came as quick as we could", Kendall said, a little breathlessly. "This is awful!! I can't wait to get out there and...." William placed a hand on the girl's shoulder to calm her. "Sorry. I just have a lot of anger to burn."

Buffy chuckled, rather bitterly. "Yeah, you and me both. It's been ten years since I dusted a vamp. I'm almost afraid that I won't remember how."

"On the way over, Kendall and I went through some of the major bands of vampires that have sprung up in the past decade. Of course, we then realized that it must be a band that was around when you lived here and fortunately for us, there are only one or two left from then", William readjusted his glasses. It seemed to be a nervous habit particular to all Watchers.

Willow re-entered the living room. "With Angel's help, we shouldn't have any problems tracking down the vampires who took Blakely and Jeremy. He'll meet us in the cemetery."

Paul shook his head. "I took off a week from the coroner's office only to end up in a cemetery? Now that's irony."

"Paul's a medical examiner", Buffy explained. She looked around, impatiently. "So, what are we waiting for?"

Willow sat down on the couch. "Well, I'm waiting for Helen. Someone's gotta watch Anne. But you all can go ahead and I'll catch up."

"Are you sure?" Xander touched his wife's shoulder, lovingly.

She squeezed his fingers in an affirmative reply. "Oz'll be here in a minute. We can walk to the cemetery together."

This seemed to be a signal for everyone to move into the foyer. Once there, Xander reached into the hall closet and pulled out several stakes. Buffy held her husband's hand tightly as they left the house. Two trips to the cemetery in one day. She really was still a Slayer.

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The small group made their way towards Sunnydale Cemetery. Kendall, as the more active Slayer, took the lead, followed closely by her Watcher. Buffy and Paul walked a few feet behind them and Xander brought up the rear. With the exception of Paul, everyone carried a thick stake. Buffy had offered her husband one, but he had politely refused. She had accepted that, but secretly stuck a sixth stake in her coat pocket.

Spinning on her heel, Kendall turned to look at Buffy. "Most of the vamps I've been seeing lately have been around a particular mausoleum. I think that'd be a good starting point", Kendall told the older woman.

Buffy smiled. It seemed like Kendall liked to be in charge. "That sounds like the spot. If it's the one I'm thinking of, I know that it has a passageway to the sewer system." She turned her head slightly and caught Xander's eye. Did he remember?

Apparently, he did. "This day has turned out to be one big trip down Memory Lane, hasn't it?", he said. "It's not the best street in the world."

"Yeah", Buffy agreed. She felt her husband tighten his grip on her hand. "Paul?"

Her husband was staring into the darkness to their right. "Honey, what does a vampire look like?"

"They usually look like everyone else except when they're about to attack. Then they get all wrinkly and yellow-eyed and sharp...um...teethed", Kendall answered.

"Why?", Buffy asked her husband.

Paul swallowed thickly. "Because I think there are some over there."

The entire group stopped and looked to see. To Buffy's dismay, there were three vampires headed straight for them. "They've gotten bolder since I left", she commented.



"Do you recognize them?", William asked, lowly. His fingers curled tighter around his stake. Buffy nodded her head. "Then, I conclude that our search for your children's abductors is over."

Xander was skeptic. "Seems a little bit too easy if you ask me."

Buffy shook the tension out of her shoulders. "I agree, but I'm not going to complain. Let's get this over with." Fueled by adrenaline, she took a step forward, but Paul held her back.

"What are you doing, Buffy?" There was an edge of panic to his voice that Buffy had never heard before.

She looked up at her husband. "I'm doing my job." Buffy pulled the sixth stake from her jacket. "Take this. Just aim for the heart." She turned to Xander. "Try not to let him have to use that." Xander nodded. Before Paul could protest any further, Buffy headed straight for the vamps.

William nudged his Slayer. "Two is better than one", he told her. Kendall followed Buffy and the two Slayers faced off against their opponents.

"It's been a long time", one of the vampires said to Buffy. She vaguely recognized him as someone she had gone to school with her junior year.

"So I've been told", she replied, dryly. "Look, my witty banter is rusty, so can we just get to the fighting part? I've really missed that."

One of the other vampires grinned, evilly. "My favorite part."

"It won't be for long", Buffy said, shifting her body to prepare for an attack. "Oops, guess the banter just slips out." A powerful kick sent the first vampire reeling backwards. Kendall took her cue and delivered a hard punch to one of the other vamps. The third vampire advanced towards her, but she was prepared with a swinging kick to his abdomen. William moved to help his Slayer with the second vamp. Meanwhile, Buffy's vampire quickly recovered his balance. Snarling, he backhanded the older Slayer. She fell to the ground, the wind momentarily knocked out of her. Paul tried to rush to his wife's side, but Xander held him back.

"She's fine, I promise you. She's taken much worse than that", Xander told him. As if to prove him right, Buffy thrust her leg out and swung it around, hitting the back of the vamp's knees. He lost his balance and crashed down next to her. Buffy grasped her stake, rolled over and brought her arm down to the vampire's chest, but not quickly enough. He grabbed her wrist and with his other hand, pulled the stake from her.

"Getting too old for this?", he hissed into her ear. The vamp twisted her arm, enjoying the pain evident on Buffy's face. "Just tell me when you've had enough."

"She's had enough", a voice over them declared. Buffy was relieved to open her eyes and see Angel, vamped out and standing over them with a stake in his hand. Her opponent released her and rolled away just

before Angel could plunge the stake into his back. He laughed, horribly. Buffy suddenly realized what he was laughing at.

"Angel!! Look out behind you!!", she screamed. He turned around just in time to ward off a stake from a fourth vampire who had just arrived. As Angel began fighting the vamp, Buffy scrambled to her feet and ran over to Xander and Paul. "Xander, get Paul out of here."

"Buffy, if you're staying, then I'm staying", Paul declared. He reached to touch his wife's injured jaw, but she pulled back.

"Get out of here", she instructed. "I can't protect you if...." She was cut off by a heavy blow to the back of her neck. Her body slipped to the hard ground.

The first vampire looked down at her then up at Paul. "I hope you don't mind if I borrow her for awhile." He grabbed Buffy's slender waist and hoisted her up. His yellow eyes caught Xander reaching for his stake. With his free hand, he punched Xander, knocking him out. "I'll take him too." The vamp draped Xander over his shoulder, and despite the weight of the two friends, hurried off across the cemetery. Frozen from shock and horror, Paul watched the vamp disappear.

Angel drove his stake through the fourth vampire's heart and watched as it exploded into dust. William and Kendall were also just finishing up their fights and in a few seconds, the other two vamps dissintegrated. Panting for breath, Kendall approached Angel. "Thanks for the help."

"My pleasure." The benevolent vampire took a quick look around. "Where's Buffy?" He saw Paul standing very still a few feet away. "Who is that?"

"Buffy's husband", William replied. The Watcher ran over to the man. "Mr. Garrison? What happened? Where is Buffy?"

"And Mr. H", Kendall added. "I don't see him either."

Paul's gaze was fixed towards the direction the vamp had taken his wife. "It took them."

William grabbed the man's shoulder. "Both of them? Are they alive?"

"I...I don't know. He...hit Buffy....then Xander....then he just took them", Paul stammered. He snapped to attention, suddenly. "We have to go after them."

Angel blocked the man's path. "We will, but we need to have a definite plan first. We don't know where he took them, or more importantly why."

"Who are you?", Paul glared at the man who was keeping him from his wife.

William made the introduction. "Paul Garrison meet Angel." Paul looked Angel over. This man was 260 years old? "I've heard about you."

"Same here." Angel's attention didn't linger on Buffy's husband for very long. It was a little too painful. He turned to the younger Slayer and her Watcher. "They must want something very important from Buffy to go to all of this trouble."

William agreed. "We need to figure out what for before we attempt another rescue mission, risking the chance that they may take all of us captive."

"Wait a minute!", Paul protested. "What are you saying? We're not going to go after that...thing?"

Kendall stepped forward. "I'm with Mr. Garrison. That vamp left with two unconscious adults. He couldn't have gotten that far. How fast could he go?"

Her Watcher wiped a bit of blood from his chin. "He was a big vamp. I think you're underestimating him. Plus he has the advantage of knowing where he's going. We don't know that."

"I think it would best if we regrouped in the library and tried to find out what they want Buffy and Xander for. Then we'll know where to go from there." Angel looked around for consensus. Everyone seemed to agree, except for Paul.

"I don't know if I agree, but you all certainly know more about this than I do. If you're not worried that some vampire is going to chew on my wife's neck, then logically, I shouldn't be either." There was definite anger and frustration in his voice.

Angel didn't quite know what to make of this man. He wanted to resent him, but he also had to give Buffy's husband some credit. He was dealing with the situation far better than most outsiders would. And, above all, Angel could tell Paul's love and devotion to the Slayer was unquestionable. Buffy deserved that. "If they wanted to kill Buffy and Xander, they would have done it here", he told Paul.

A motion in the distance caught William's eye. "Oz and Willow are coming", he announced as the former couple came into view.

"Sorry we're late", Willow apologized as soon as she reached them. "Anne's getting sick, I think, and I didn't want to leave her....and why is everyone staring at me like that?" Fear clutched her heart. "What's happened?"

Angel stepped towards her. "I'm sorry Will. The vamps took Buffy and Xander in the middle of the fight."

"Took them? Took them, right? Not killed them", Willow's eyes pleaded for an affirmative response.

"They're alive Mrs. H", Kendall assured the older woman. "The vamps want them for something."

Oz's brow furrowed. He looked at Paul. "How's he taking it?"

"He doesn't understand why we just don't just go get them, but on the whole, he's dealing", Paul answered for himself.

Willow walked over and put her hand on the man's shoulder. "I don't know how, but I know that they're going to be fine. All of them." Paul forced an appreciative smile.

"Let's move it back to the library", Kendall declared, rubbing her hands together, excitedly. "We've got a hell of a lot of research to do."

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The memories came to her through the darkness, through the void. Bits and pieces of her life, one after the other.....

"....hard class, isn't it? I'm Paul Garrison, future doctor...."  
"Buffy Summers. Future undecided." Laughter.

"I had a great time....can I call you again sometime?" "I think I'd be very disappointed if you didn't, Paul..."

"....I want to be with you forever....will you marry me, Buffy?" "Of course I will....."

"Do you, Buffy Anne Summers take Benjamin Paul Garrison to be your lawfully wedded husband..." "I do."

"Paul....we're going to have a baby....." Joyful cries. "You and me, Buffy, we're going to be the best parents ever!"

"I can't push anymore, Paul!!" "Buffy, you're doing great....oh my god...I can see the head! Just one more push, baby, and it'll be over, I promise..." Screams. "Mr. and Mrs. Garrison....it's a boy."

"Paul.....I got into the law school....and guess what? Jeremy's not going to be an only child for much longer!" "Hear that, Jeremy? You're going to be a big brother and mommy's going to be a lawyer!"

"C'mon, baby.....it's almost over....breathe." The sound of lamaze breathing. "....we are NOT doing this again, okay?" More screaming. "It's a girl."

"Congratulations, Mrs. Garrison. You've passed the bar exam....."

"....I love you, Buffy....every waking moment of my life...waking...wake up....."

The darkness began to lift and she could feel someone shaking her.

"Buffy...wake up, Buffy." It was Xander, she could tell. He sounded urgent. She fought to open her eyes. "Thank God", Xander breathed a sigh of relief. "That vamp hit you so hard, I was afraid you might not come to at all."

"What's going on, Xander?" She tried to sit up, but found she couldn't. The pain in her head was too severe.

"Just stay still, Buffy", her old friend ordered. "I don't really

know what's going on. All I know is they knocked us out and dragged us here. But where 'here' is, I have no idea." Xander noticed the blood caking the back of her neck and with a piece of cloth torn from his shirt, he tried to clean the wound as best he could. "I think we're underground, but we're in some sort of room."

Buffy winced at the slight pressure of the cloth and the pain it brought. "Ow....thanks. Have you seen my children?"

"No, I haven't. I've only been awake for a few minutes", Xander apologized. "That's about all the blood that's coming off. Maybe they'll give us some water eventually and we can really clean it."

The Slayer grimaced. "You sound like a Boy Scout leader, Xander."

"Just preparing for...", he stopped suddenly. "Willow didn't tell you, did she?"

"Tell me what?" She slowly sat up.

Xander paused. "We're pregnant again. Well, \*she\* is...physically. The doctors say it's a boy. So, I'm looking forward to becoming Troop Leader Harris in a few years." Despite their current situation, Xander couldn't help but grinning widely.

"Oh, Xan. Congratulations", Buffy smiled as warmly as she could. "If I had known, I wouldn't have let her walk back by herself tonight."

"It probably wouldn't have stopped her. You should have seen her when she was pregnant with Anne. I tried to get her to stay home, put up her feet, quit the more strenuous spells. But Will has a mind of her own." He chuckled, then a shadow fell over his handsome face. "I hope she knows that I'm all right."

"I think she does", Buffy reassured him. "Now Paul....I'm not so sure about him. He's had....a rather rough night." Xander suddenly began to laugh. "What's so funny?"

He continued laughing. "Nothing. Just the two of us. Sitting here, dealing with vampires, bruised and bloody....just like old times. Except we're both married with kids. I find it humorous."

Buffy looked down at her hands, smiling. "Yeah, I guess it is. We've come a long way, baby."

"Ten years can do that to anyone. Ten years....geez. I sometimes think it all happened yesterday." Xander shook his head in disbelief. "Do you...do you still think about Cordy....a lot?", Buffy asked, quietly.

Her old friend took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before exhaling. "Not as much anymore. For a few years....I don't know. I wasn't even here, really. Yeah, we had broken up....but we were getting better, even moving towards a reconciliation....and then...." He stopped, not needing, or wanting, to recount that night. "But, it's in the past. Over and done with."

"Yeah", Buffy agreed. "The past is definitely done with." No soon were the words out of her mouth, than the door to their cell abruptly opened and an all too recognizable vampire stepped inside. She gasped slightly, but quickly regained her cool. "Of course, I have been known to be wrong."

"Buff, is that....?", Xander stared in disbelief.

She nodded. "Yeah...it is. I should have realized it'd probably be you behind all of this, Spike."

Her old foe grinned evilly. "It's nice to see you too, love. You're looking absolutely fabulous."

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"Any luck?", Kendall asked her Watcher. He shook his head. Letting out a loud sigh, she pushed away the books that lay open before her. "Remind me again why we didn't just go after that vamp?"

William opened his mouth to answer her question, literally, but then thought better of it. "You're giving up a little bit early, Kendall. We've only been here for...."

"Two hours and fourteen minutes", Paul broke in, not looking up from his book.

"And we have yet to find any reason why a group of vampires would take a Slayer, one of her friends and both of her children", Angel continued for Buffy's husband.

Willow turned her attention from her computer. "I didn't imagine it would be this hard. I mean, there's not \*that\* many instances of a Slayer having children at all, so a ritual of any kind involving them would be extremely rare... right?"

"How do we know that they're planning a ritual?", Oz asked, coming from the library's office. "We always assume ritual action, but it could just be a routine vampire kidnapping."

Angel closed one book and reached for another. "Point taken, but still, they've gone to a lot of trouble to kidnap a very odd group. There's got to be a common denominator."

"If it weren't for Xander, that denominator would be very recognizable", William mused.

Xander's wife looked up suddenly. "If it weren't for Xander.....", she repeated. "That's it!"

"What's up, Mrs. H?" Kendall got up and stretched.

Willow stood up. "If you were going to perform a dark ritual and you wanted to cover your tracks, wouldn't it make sense that you'd kidnap, along with the ritual's necessary participants, someone who wasn't needed, to throw the people who were trying to rescue them off your path?" She took a needed breath, putting one hand on her lower abdomen.

Paul's brow furrowed. "That...thing did take Xander as an afterthought."

"I think you may have figured it out, Willow", Angel declared. "So, let's shift our attention solely to anything involving a Slayer and her children." The group returned to their reading with renewed energy.

"Did I sound as much like Giles as I think I did?", Willow asked Kendall.

The young Slayer laughed. "All you were missing was the tweed."

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William the Bloody, or Spike as he was known by most people, approached Buffy. "I'm sure I'm not the first person to welcome you home, cutie. So, I'll just say, long time, no see."

"Not long enough", Buffy muttered. "What do you want with us, Spike? Where are my children? If you hurt them, I swear I will cut off your head with an Exacto-knife."

Spike found this funny. "I'm so glad to see that fire of yours hasn't burned out completely! I was told that your fighting was....less than refined, but I had hoped you'd still be the little firespark that I remembered."

"I'll ask again. Where are my children?" Buffy's voice was low and dangerous. Every fiber of her being wanted to attack Spike, but she knew he was far stronger than her, at least in her present condition.

"All in good time." Spike noticed Xander. "I see that my boys have brought along another blast from the past as well. The last time I saw you, you were unconscious and bleeding all over my Dru's old bed in the basement of the factory. And now look at you. About to be a father for a second time."

Xander's eyes narrowed. "How do you know that?"

"It's terribly cliched, but I have my sources. I must say, I was quite surprised to hear you hooked up with the little witch. Of course, she always was a pretty little...." He was interrupted by Xander lunging for him. Spike easily blocked the man's punch and pushed him down, out of the way.

Buffy reached for her friend, to make sure he was alright. "You never were Mr. Subtlety, Spike. So why don't you just cut to the chase and tell why you've taken us and my children captive."

"Do I really have to have a reason? Can't I just do it for the hell of it?" Spike laughed at the Slayer's deadly look. "Oh all right, I do have my reasons. But you know, I just don't feel like explaining them right now."

"I suppose it's safe to assume that you're the one who sent me that picture of Giles?"

The blond vampire bowed. "Guilty as charged. It took me a very long time to find you. I wasn't about to waste a perfectly good picture that I went to a lot of trouble to take, just because the subject had....fallen victim to one of my boys. Besides, it worked, didn't it? After ten years, you're here."

Buffy could feel her throat closing up. "One of...one of your vamps killed Giles?"

"He was new. Terribly proud of himself though, having bagged a Watcher." Spike pulled out a cigarette and lit it, as if Giles had been nothing more than a meal. "Don't worry though....your former boy-toy staked him awhile back. By the way, what's the deal with you two? Is the home fire still burning and all that jazz?"

"Angel and I are, as always, none of your business, Spike." Buffy clenched her teeth. Spike shrugged and took a drag off his cigarette. "Are you ever going to tell us what you're planning on doing with us?"

"Why should I, love? So you can form a plan of your own....escape or whatever it is you do?" The vampire thought for a second as he put out his cigarette on the stone wall. "Ah, but I'll give you this one little thing....think of it as my very belated thanks for getting rid of Angelus." Spike walked back and banged on the door. A moment later, the door swung open and the big vampire who had captured Buffy and Xander entered carrying Blakely.

Ignoring the pounding in her head, Buffy jumped to her feet. "Blakely!", she cried. Hearing her mother's voice, Blakely began to cry.

"Mommy!", she sobbed, holding out her little arms for Buffy. "Mommy...."

At this, Buffy instinctively reached for her daughter, but Spike took the little girl from the other vampire before she could touch her. "Please....please, just let me hold her."

It was obvious Spike took much pleasure at her near-begging. He put one long finger to his lips to quiet Blakely's cries. "Shhh...Blakely...shhh. That's a very pretty dress you're wearing."

Buffy moved forward again, but Spike's bigger henchman, grabbed her arm to hold her back. "Spike....leave her alone. For God's sake....leave her alone....." Xander's arm circled her shoulders in support.

Spike ignored her. "Did you pick out that pretty pink dress?", he asked Blakely. "Or did your mummy?"

Blakely sniffed, her tears slowing down at Spike's soft tone. "I did. Mommy doesn't like pink. Where's Jerwemy?"

"Yeah, Spike. Where's Jeremy?", Xander asked for Buffy. The Slayer had gone slightly catatonic.

"Don't worry. He's being taken care of", Spike spoke to Buffy's daughter instead of Xander.



The little girl looked at the strange man who was holding her. "I want my mommy. I want my daddy. I want Jerwemy. I wanna go home!" Xander could feel Buffy crying.

Spike put on a show of being hurt by this. "Aren't we being nice to you, Blakely?" The child looked doubtful. "Did you see all the nice dolls we have here?"

"I have a dolly at home", Blakely was full of five year old indignance.

"Yes, but here, we have so many of them. And not just dolls, we have all sorts of toys. You could play with them.....forever", Spike tucked a curl of Blakely's blond hair behind her tiny ear.

The one little word "forever", snapped Buffy out of her trance. "You horrible bastard!", she hissed at the vampire. "Don't even think about...." Spike cut her off.

"Would you like that, Blakely?", he asked, smiling. "You'd play with dolls all day long, and never have to pick them up, never have to brush your teeth, never have to eat your vegetables.....for all of eternity."

Blakely stared, wide-eyed, at Spike. "No veggitables.....forever?"

"Blakely, sweetie...don't listen to him. Please baby, he's not a good man.....Spike, even you can't be evil enough to.....she's my.....please.....", Buffy slipped to her knees, hating to show Spike her weakness, though he obviously already knew what it was.

"I've never had a child....never really wanted one", Spike said, thoughtfully examining Blakely. "Still, that paternal instinct exists....even in me." He looked at the Slayer kneeling before him and grinned.

Buffy, with Xander's help, got back up. "Why are you doing this, Spike?"

"Because I can." Spike paused before returning his attention to Blakely. "Now, weren't you saying something about your brother?" The little girl put one finger in her mouth and nodded. "I think I can take care of that." He nodded towards the large vampire who immediately left the room.

Xander bravely took a step forward. "Okay. You've had your fun, Spike. But it's time to wrap this whole game up. Tell us why you're doing this."

Spike chuckled, readjusting his hold on Blakely. "You mean you didn't believe the parental instinct line? Oh all right, I suppose the villian explaining his ingenious plan is standard kidnapping procedure." Spike paused. "Have you ever heard of the Rite of Finnuala?" Xander shook his head; Buffy didn't seem completely aware of their conversation. Her gaze was fixed on her daughter. Spike continued, happily. "Finnuala was an Scottish Slayer, lived about fifty years before our good friend Angel was born. She was the first Slayer on record to have concieved and carried a child to term after

she was called."

"Fascinating history lesson, but what does this have to do with us?", Xander asked, feigning impatience. In truth, he could almost tell where the relevance of Spike's story lay.

"Hold on there, mate", Spike warned. "I'm just getting to the good part."

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"So, she was the first Slayer to have a kid?", Oz summed up what Kendall's Watcher had just finished saying. After only twenty minutes of searching for rituals involving a Slayer and her children, William had come up with a list of exactly one ritual. The Rite of Finnuala.

"Not the first to have one, just the first to have one after she was called", William clarified. "Several Slayers before her had children before their calling."

Kendall held up her hand. "This may be a stupid question, but aren't Slayers usually very young when they're called? I mean, I was fifteen and my parents didn't even let me date before then."

"Shakespeare's Juliet was fourteen and considered at peak marrying age. The average age for a mother centuries ago was much younger than it is today", Willow told the girl. "If you had paid attention in my history class, you would have known that."

"I paid attention, Mrs. H", Kendall said, slightly guilty.

Angel stood up and began to pace. "What exactly does this rite entail?"

"The references are sketchy to put it mildly, but from what I can gather, when Finnuala's child was about four or five, several of the local vampires turned her." William took off his glasses.

"Turned her into what?", Paul asked from his seat at another table.

Willow's face paled and her hand returned to her slightly curved abdomen. "A vampire."

"What happened to Finnuala?", Oz asked, watching Willow out of the corner of his eye.

William replaced his glasses. "Her five year old vampire daughter drained her."

There was a slight pause before Paul shot to his feet. "This isn't happening. Blakely is five years old.....and Buffy is a Slayer.....oh my god....this can \*not\* be really happening!"

"How often has this rite been used?", Angel inquired.

"Only twice, once in France about 1844, a Slayer named Chantal. Then in Russia, 1921. The Slayer's name was Verushka ", William replied. "After that, there aren't anymore reports of a Slayer having a

child....until Buffy."

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"Isn't it great how there's a ritual for every occasion?", Spike asked, practically gleeful.

"You're sick", Xander shook his head, disgustedly. "You really need to get a hobby."

Spike threw his head back, laughing. "This is my hobby!"

Buffy's body had gone completely numb ever since Spike had launched his detailed description of the Rite of Finnuala. "Please....don't hurt my baby....my Blakely", she whispered, her mouth dry.

"I have no intentions of hurting your daughter", Spike told the Slayer. Suddenly the door opened and the large vampire re-entered, holding Jeremy. "Now your son....that's a different story."

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Kendall joined Angel in pacing around the library. "Now that we know all of this, what are we going to do to stop it? The offensive plan didn't work and we can't be sure they'll give us an opportunity to try our defense skills."

The vampire looked almost helpless. "I really...don't know. I was sort of hoping someone else would come up with a brilliant plan."

"Don't give up on the offense just yet", Willow said, her brow crinkled in thought. She turned to her ex-fiancee. "Oz, how close are we to the next full moon?"

"About a week. Why?"

"Do you think if we went back to the cemetery, you could track Buffy and Xander's scent?", Willow asked, biting her lip.

Oz thought for a second, then nodded his head. "I should be able to; at the very least, I can get the general direction they were taken."

"Um....may I simply say that....I'm very lost", Paul spoke up. "What are you talking about?"

William smiled sympathetically. "Another one of our little group's quirks. We'll explain more later."

"Oz is a werewolf", Kendall informed Buffy's husband, apparently unwilling to wait until later.

Paul nodded slowly. "You know, five hours ago, I would have laughed at that. Now, it almost seems to make sense."

"After you accept the fact that vampires exist, everything else seems pretty believable", Kendall said, wisely.

Willow began to pull her coat on as she walked to the library doors. "If we're going to do this, it needs to be now before the wind blows away any chance of tracking them." One by one, the rest of the group followed her.

Kendall turned to Angel as the others went ahead of them. "Angel...honestly...do you think we'll make it in time? Before they do this?"

The vampire shook his head slightly. "I really don't know, Kendall. I certainly hope we do, though. For Buffy's sake."

"Who would do such a horrible thing? I've met some bad-ass vampires, but whoever is doing this really has it out for her."

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Buffy had never been so grateful for anything as she was for Xander's arms holding her up after Spike announced his plans for her first-born. But even her old friend's strong embrace couldn't stop the scream that escaped her throat or the tears that coursed down her face.

"Jeremy!", she cried. "My baby....." Her arms stretched out, reaching for her son. She didn't cry for the danger to her own life, but for the soul of the child she had carried for nine months, endured fourteen hours of labor to bring into the world and spent the last six and a half years loving with all of her heart. Buffy would never know whether her next actions were the result of maternal instincts or simply a recovery of her before-impaired reflexes, but before she realized what she was doing, she threw off Xander's arms and ran forward, delivering a powerful punch to the face of the vampire holding Jeremy, knocking the creature out. Before he could fall, Buffy gathered the little boy up in her arms. Hurriedly, she examined him. Except for some minor bruises, he appeared to be fine. Scared, but fine. His arms wrapped around Buffy's neck and he buried his face into her shoulder, crying. "It's okay sweetie....everything is going to be okay", she soothed.

Spike, apparently thrown by the sudden turn of events, tightened his hold on Blakely. "I wouldn't say that if I were you, pet." He vamped out and lifted Buffy's daughter up until her little neck was just within reach of his fangs. "The cards are not exactly in your favor."

Buffy fought the urge to make a lunge for daughter, knowing that Spike would not hesitate to bite the child. Instead, she handed Jeremy over to Xander and faced Spike. "Why are you doing this? You said you had reasons.....well, they had better be damn good reasons. I want to hear them. But if this has something....\*anything\* to do with Drusilla, spare me, please."

"It's all your fault that she left me.....that she's gone now." Spike's face returned to normal.

"So Psycho-girl didn't take you back and then she got dusted, eh? Why do I feel no sympathy?" Buffy shook her head. "You truly are pathetic, Spike." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted taunting the vampire. He still had them, especially

Blakely, in a very precarious situation.

He snarled. "Oh, I'm the pathetic one here? You abandoned everyone who counted on you because you couldn't take the heat anymore. This world existed for two years without a Slayer. Do you know how much fun we all had?"

His words had their desired affect. Buffy froze up. "I had to....I had to go..."

"If it helps you sleep at night, love, just keep on thinking that. But I know that I had many a good meal thanks to your cowardice." He grinned evilly. "The truth's a bitch, isn't it?"

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Oz breathed in the cool night air. He inhaled deeply again and cocked his head to the right slightly. Paul almost could have sworn that his ears perked up as well.

"Can you smell them?", Willow asked, coming up behind her high school sweetheart.

He nodded, still intent on the air around him. "I smell blood....blood that's different than normal blood...stronger. It has to be Buffy's. You did say she was injured, right?" Oz looked to Paul for confirmation.

"The...vampire hit her on the back of her neck. I'm sure she was bleeding." Paul crossed his arms tightly.

"I can follow this scent." He walked forward a few steps, sniffing the air. "It's leading that way", he announced, pointing to the left.

Willow immediately began walking in the direction his finger pointed to, but Angel ran to catch up with her. "Will...", he said, lowly. "Maybe you and Paul should head back to your house."

She looked up at the vampire, incredulously. "Why on earth would I do that, Angel? My husband and my friend are out there, not to mention her children....I'm going to do everything I can to help get them back. And I'm sure Paul feels the same way. How can you ask us not to be a part of their rescue?"

His eyes strayed down to her gently rounding belly, then back up to meet her glance. "I think Xander would agree with me."

Willow stared at him for a second before relenting. "Paul...would you walk me back to my house?" Buffy's husband looked like he wanted to protest. "Please?"

Paul reluctantly followed the red-head. After a moment, he turned back around to the remaining group. "Please....bring my family back safely."

"We will, Mr. G. I promise we'll save them", Kendall said, solemnly.

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"I couldn't.....I can't save everyone", Buffy said aloud. New tears threatened to spill over. "I didn't think I was a Slayer after I left....."

Spike chuckled. "Very well thought-out excuses, love. But you don't really believe them, do you? You know you blew it. You let so many people die....your friends....your Watcher....your mother....even your fellow Slayers. You're like a one woman cyclone of disaster. And now, your children." He looked down at Blakely, who had been scared into complete silence. "I don't think a Slayer's children's blood has any more appeal than normal blood, but it should be fun to drink anyways."

Xander looked at his old friend, frantically. She did not even react to Spike's last sentence. "Buffy....Buff, he's wrong....you didn't let anyone die."

"Yes....I did. They're all dead because of me." Buffy slumped to her knees.

"Buffy...don't do this again!! Don't you dare give up again!", Xander shouted, setting Jeremy down onto the ground.

The Slayer stared straight ahead, playing absent-mindedly with the dirt at her fingertips. "I had to go.....I can't save anyone. I'm not a Slayer anymore.....I'm just a lawyer..." Her voice took on a tone Xander had never heard before....slow, distracted....it scared him.

"You didn't have to go, Buffy. But you made a choice to, and right or wrong, it was your choice. You have to make that choice again. For God's sake, Buffy, don't give up. You promised Paul you wouldn't give up", Xander reminded her.

Buffy dropped her head. "I shouldn't have come back. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I've just put everyone I love in danger again. I put everyone in danger...."

"If you really believe that, Buffy, then you don't deserve to be the Slayer anymore."

Spike watched their exchange with an amused smile on his lips. "You can't win this fight....why even try?"

Buffy let Xander's words seep into her confused mind. Slowly, she lifted her head and looked Spike directly in the eye. "Because.....it's my destiny." In a flash, she jumped to her feet and drew her five and a half foot frame up as tall as it could go. "The Slayer's back in town, Spikey.....in every way possible. Now, I suggest you get the hell away from my daughter."

"Or you'll do what? Take me down? Your daughter would be dead before you could even make a fist", Spike warned Buffy. But he couldn't hide the smallest hint of fear in his voice.

"I don't think you're going to hurt Blakely, Spike. If anything happens to her, you'll not only have lost the last card you have to

play, but you will have made me crazy beyond comprehension. Do you know what happens to a Slayer when she gets mad? She gets very strong....and you know it's true, don't you?" Buffy put her hands on her hips. "Put Blakely down and let us go."

The sudden change in Buffy's demeanor confused Spike, but also made him extremely angry. All of his carefully laid plans....they were all falling apart. He vamped out again and dropped Blakely. Xander rushed forward, picked her up and quickly moved her back to safety.

"Are you really ready to fight me?", Spike growled. "Even at your best, you weren't ever able to kill me."

Buffy balled up her fists. "I've never had a better reason than I do now."

"All right, pet. Show me what you've got."

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"This is it. The scent stops here", Oz announced. The group came to a stop behind him and looked around. Nothing but modern, flat gravestones.

"So much for our masoleum theory", Kendall sighed, brushing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes. "Now what?"

Angel's brow furrowed. "Hold on a sec." He kicked the ground, causing a strange metallic noise. "There's a manhole here."

"In the middle of the cemetery?", William puzzled. "Are you sure it's not a headstone?"

The vampire kicked again. "Well, the top is coming off. I hope it's not a headstone." He got down on his knees, shoved the heavy metal disc off to the side and peered into the hole that suddenly became visible. "It's a way into the sewer system."

"Okay. Let's go then", Kendall sat down on the ground and prepared to lower herself into the hole.

Angel looked over at Oz. "This could get hairy. I'd feel better if I knew someone was watching Will and Buffy's husband."

Oz took the hint. "Be careful man." He turned and went back the way they had come.

Kendall slid her lithe body into the manhole and fell several seconds before her feet hit solid ground. She looked up and saw her Watcher's face looking down on her.

"What do you see?", he called. Angel's face appeared across from his.

The young Slayer looked around. "Not much." Suddenly, she could hear strange noises "Wait a sec...I hear something. It sounds like a fight. You'd better get down here."

Angel's face disappeared and a moment later, his feet poked through

the hole, followed by his entire body. He landed next to her and quickly moved out of the way as William followed suit. In the brief time this took, the sounds had grown louder. Kendall pointed to the direction they were coming from. "Anybody mind if I go first?"

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With every bit of her strength, Buffy punched Spike, happy when the blow made impact across his face. Spike staggered slightly, but recovered and gave her a roundhouse of his own. The fight had been pretty much like this for the past five minutes, back and forth blows, neither one making any real progress. Meanwhile, Xander had taken the children to the far end of the room, as removed from the fight as he could get them. He watched Buffy high kick, aiming for Spike's nose, but the vamp anticipated her move and ducked out of the way.

"C'mon love....even you can do better than this." Spike's leg hit the back of Buffy's knees and she buckled, but quickly regained her balance. In return, she punched him again, taking the opportunity to grab his arm and flip him over. Spike's fall was broken by the still-unconscious body of his henchman. Snarling, he got back up and came at Buffy once again. The fight was becoming quite pointless, she could tell. She needed a stake....even a pencil would do at this point. But there was nothing in the room that could be fashioned into a weapon.

"I seem to remember telling you that you couldn't win this fight", Spike said, triumphantly backing against the door. "But did you listen to me? No. You just...." His speech was interrupted when the door suddenly burst open, sending him sprawling to the floor. Angel appeared in the doorway, flanked on either side by William and Kendall.

Spike, dazed, lifted his head, twisting it to see who had knocked him down. "Well, well", he said upon seeing his sire. "Look who's come to visit."

Angel did a mental double-take, but managed to remain focused. "What a surprise, Spike."

"William the Bloody", William recognized the vampire. "The Council has you down as having been staked in Bavaria two years ago."

Spike picked himself up off the ground. "It would take a lot more than a mob of bloody Bavarian fools to get rid of me that easily."

Kendall rolled her eyes. "Feeling the testosterone in this room." William put a hand on her arm to quiet her. The two Slayers Spike had killed were very much on his mind.

Angel's attention had switched to the slightly battered Buffy. "Got a welcome back present for you", he called, tossing her a stake.

"Thanks", Buffy caught it in mid-air. "Who says diamonds are a girl's best friend?" She faced Spike and smiled sweetly. "Still think I can't win?", she asked him.



Spike didn't have time to answer her because at that moment, his fallen henchman began to stir. It was his turn to smile. "I'll answer your question in just a moment once Joseph wakes up."

Buffy took a breath, knowing full well that in a moment they would lose the upper hand. Never taking her eyes off of Spike, she addressed Xander. "Xan, the children." Her old friend understood. He gathered up Jeremy and Blakely and made a dash for the door.

"William, Kendall....make sure they all get back all right", Angel instructed, stepping into the room. Kendall started to protest, but a look from her Watcher stopped her before the words could even form.

"Tell Paul....tell him I'll be there as soon as I can. Just gotta tie up some loose ends", Buffy told them before the little group disappeared.

By this time, Joseph had managed to groggily sit up. The rage in his eyes at having been bested was obvious. His game face appeared and he lunged for Buffy. The Slayer easily avoided his body as it rushed past her. With one leg, she pushed him back to the ground, putting the vamp in a perfect position to receive the point of her stake in his back. After a second, Joseph exploded into dust. "That was almost too easy", she said, straightening up.

Spike realized in that instant, looking at the Slayer and his sire, that he had been defeated....again. "Why do I even come to this damned town?", he asked himself.

"Good question", Angel said, advancing on his fellow vampire. "Why do you?"

"Masochistic tendencies", Buffy theorized, coming at Spike from a different angle. "Do you want to do the honors, Angel?" She offered him her stake. "You did create him, after all."

They should have known that Spike wasn't about to accept his death so readily. With a deep snarl, he ran for the door, knocking both Angel and Buffy out of the way. He paused in the doorway. "This isn't over....not by a long shot." With that, he vanished.

Without hesitation, Buffy ran after him but he was gone, mostly likely having escaped through some unseen trapdoor. She stomped her foot. "Damn!! Why can't he just stay still long enough to get staked?" She paused. "I was really looking forward to not having to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life."

"Are you okay? I mean...other than that", Angel asked, awkwardly.

"I'm tired. I want to hold my kids....and Paul." She stopped, realizing Angel probably didn't want to hear about that. "Thank you, Angel. For everything."

Her first love shrugged off the thanks. "I'd do it again in a heartbeat", he replied, truthfully. "C'mon. Let's get you back to your family." They didn't speak until after he had guided her through

the sewer system and back up the manhole.

Buffy gratefully breathed in the fresh air. "I never thought I'd be so happy to be back in the cemetery."

"I never thought I'd be so happy to see you in one." Angel smiled, weakly. They began to take the well-worn path back to Willow's house. "So....what happens now?"

The Slayer shrugged. "I honestly don't know. I have some very big choices to make....slaying....my family....my job....how do they all fit together? I've come to one of those defining moments you hear so much about."

"Yeah...believe me, I understand." Angel held open the cemetery's gate for her. "How do you feel about it all?"

"I...I'm a little scared, Angel. The last time I came to one of these moments, I made the wrong choice. I don't want to do that again." They walked on for a good while. "What would you do?"

Angel thought for a moment. "You know I can't answer that for you. They're your choices. But let me just say this. Few people are given a second chance, Buffy. Remember that when it comes time to make those big choices." He stopped in front of Willow's driveway. "Here we are."

"Are you coming in?", Buffy asked.

He shook his head. "But I'll be around....and Willow knows how to contact me, in case you ever need anything." Angel took her hand and gently kissed the back of it. "Whatever you decide to do, be happy, Buffy. That's all I've ever wanted for you."

"I know." A tear escaped the corner of her eye. "Goodbye, Angel." Buffy watched as he turned and walked away, blending into the shadows. When she couldn't see him anymore, she made her way to the front door of the house for a very emotional reunion with her family and friends.

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Six months later

"So I told the vamp, 'don't mess with me....I'm on the PTA'. You should have seen the look on his face, Will. Confused him enough for me to just stake him." Buffy kicked off her high-heeled shoes.

The sound of her friend's laughter came through the phone-line from across the country. "They really should learn to leave you alone when you come from one of those meetings."

"Yeah. But enough about me....how's Xander Junior doing?"

"Kicking up a storm. Only about two weeks until I can sleep at night without the future soccer star making field goals in my stomach." Willow laughed again. "And despite what Xander may be telling everyone, his name will not be Alexander the Second."

Buffy chuckled, twisting the phone cord around her index finger.

"What will it be?"

"Good question. We were thinking of Rupert, but then Oz suggested Chase with Rupert as a middle name." Buffy could picture her friend lovingly touching her unborn child.

The Slayer smiled. "They would have liked that, Will."

"I think they would have. Oh...what about you? Seems to me you were thinking awhile back that the Garrison clan might be expanded to a party of five in the near future", Willow said, teasingly.

"False alarm. Which is okay. I'm encountering more vamps that I had thought there would be in North Carolina. Tell Kendall that if she still wants to come out and look at Duke University, I could definitely use the help for a weekend." Buffy looked up as Paul entered the bedroom. She blew him a kiss which he caught, winking at her in return.

"I'll do that. I gotta go, Buff. Anne's waking up. Still coming out for Memorial Day weekend? Xander's already placed orders for enough meat to feed the entire city, including the vampires."

Buffy nodded, even though she knew Willow couldn't see it. "We'll be there. Take care, Will. Call me the minute anything happens, okay?"

"Of course. Bye, Buff." Buffy hung up the phone after hearing this followed by the click of Willow's phone being replaced in the receiver.

"Everything good on the home front?", Paul asked, sneaking up behind his wife and engulfing her in a hug.

Buffy smiled happily as she leaned back into his chest. "Right as rain. Almost too good." She paused. "Is that morbid of me? To think that something always has the potential to go wrong?"

Paul shook his head. "You're cautious, Buffy. I'm glad you are....makes me worry about you less when you're out there at night. I still worry...just less." He kissed the nape of her neck. "How long until we pick the kids up from school?"

She turned her head and kissed him. "Long enough."

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"Okay class, I think we have time for one more Show and Tell. Who would like to go?" Miss Phillip looked around at the little hands, stretched up as far as they could go, in order to better attract her attention. She picked one at random. "Jeremy. Come show us what you've brought."

The little boy got up from the rug and stood in front of his classmates. "Mine's a Tell, Miss Phillip."

"All right. What are you going to tell us about, Jeremy?"

"I'm going to tell you about my mommy. My mommy is the bravest person

in the whole world. She has super powers that make her strong....stronger than anyone else. If someone does something bad, she makes them go away so they can't ever hurt anyone else. She protects me and Blakely and all the other kids in the world. My mommy isn't afraid of anything. Do you know why?" Jeremy looked at the other children who were, for once, quiet. "Because...it's her job. My mommy is the Slayer." There was a short pause after he finished.

"Thank you, Jeremy. That was a very...creative story", Miss Phillip told him. Jeremy marched triumphantly back to his place on the rug, receiving many looks of wonder from his classmates. "Class, it's almost time to go home. Quietly get up and walk to get your bookbags." All twenty-four children scrambled to their feet and made a mad dash for their cubbyholes.

Miss Phillip watched them with the affectionate patience that only a first grade teacher possesses. She sat down at her desk, still thinking of Jeremy's Show and Tell.

\*Kids\*, she thought. \*What imaginations.\*

The End

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file.